

“Don’t Ever Give Up The Fight”

Remarks of Congressman Dave Obey

at the Memorial Service for U.S. Senator Gaylord Nelson

Rotunda, State Capitol Building

Madison, Wisconsin

*Wednesday, July 13, 2005*

Thank you. There is an old maxim about political funerals and

memorial services. The biggest one I ever saw was for Phillip Burton, a controversial Congressman from California. There was a huge crowd and when it was over, Phil's brother John observed to the press that the reason the crowd was so large was because half of them came to mourn his passing and the other half of the crowd came to make sure he was leaving.

This day is very different. What a great life we are celebrating here today! When Gaylord left the Senate, Carrie Lee said that the State of Wisconsin got 30 good years out of Gaylord. But all of us got 89 good years out of Gaylord and Gaylord got 89 good years out of life.

There is no doubt that Gaylord will be remembered through the years for his leadership on the environment. If he had never served a day in the U.S. Senate he would still be remembered as one of Wisconsin's great leaders because of the pioneering Outdoor Recreation Act Program he passed as Governor. And

what he accomplished in that field in the Senate is truly remarkable.

I will not repeat it to you; you know the litany and you know what the accomplishments are.

What is truly amazing about Gaylord is that he led in so many other areas; auto and tire safety, drug safety and pricing, manpower training, the Older Americans Act, and legal services for the poor.

People will not remember this, but if Howard Temin was still at the University of Wisconsin, he would. On cancer research, Gaylord stood as one man against the entire U.S. Senate to prevent the Cancer Institute from being politicized. He lost the initial vote and was the only vote cast in the Senate against that legislation. By the time it was over he had turned the entire Senate around and had saved the organizational integrity of the

NIH.

On civil rights, in 1963 after the bombing of the 16th Street church in Birmingham, my friend Joe Wilson and Ed Harris wrote an article in The Progressive magazine entitled ‘Hucksters of Hate’ about the role of J.B. Stoner and the Christian Knights of the Ku Klux Klan. Joe said afterwards that for months he carried a 38 Smith and Wesson on his hip, fearing that the Klan would come after him. He said he felt a little less lonely and a little less frightened after Gaylord put the story in the Congressional Record to show that someone was watching.

And he stood, as has been mentioned, as one of three against the first increased appropriation for Vietnam. I do remember in 1965 going to Channel 7 in Wausau. Gaylord gave an interview on Vietnam and halfway through the interviewer stopped the camera and said, ‘Senator, I’m sorry but you just misspoke.

You said we'll have 500,000 troops in Vietnam." Gaylord said, "That's right, we will." The announcer said, "Well, ok it's your funeral" and he resumed the interview.

When we walked out of the station Gaylord turned to me and said, "You know, I may have beat myself tonight but that's what I really believe will happen."

If the country and LBJ had listened to Gaylord, there would be one less war memorial to visit on the mall in Washington D.C. because 50,000 Americans would not have died.

There were two things about Gaylord that were especially special.

First, in almost everything he did, the causes he fought for were fundamental. He did not trivialize his life. And he changed the way people thought! In short, he was precisely

the kind of person that politics is short of these days.

On his signature issue, the environment, Gaylord took Aldo Leopold's conservation ethic and made people understand that it was not just about birds and fish and wildlife and natural beauty. He drove home the point that the most fundamental bond between us as biological creatures on this planet is through the common air that we breathe, the water we drink, the land we walk,...and that the most basic test of our respect for one another, for those who have gone before, and for those who will come after, is the way we meet our stewardship responsibilities to the ecosystem that sustain us all.

The second thing about Gaylord that was so special is the way he played the game.

Someone said last week that Gaylord had no enemies. That is not true. He had one – his name was Richard Nixon. And during Watergate, as has been mentioned already, we learned that Nixon had made a list of enemies he wanted to do in and that Gaylord was on that list along with Bill Proxmire and Bob Kastenmeier.

What we loved about Gaylord is that we could never have imagined Gaylord compiling an enemy list of his own.

Gaylord was my dear friend, my mentor, and my political hero.

Wisconsin has experienced two progressive revolutions in the 20th century. The first was led by Bob LaFollette at the turn of the last century. The second, after the collapse of the Progressive party in 1946, was led by a host of young reformers who remade the Democratic Party – people like Elliot Walstead, Jim Doyle, Tom Fairchild, Frank Nikolay, Horace Wilkie, Carl Thompson, John Reynolds, Henry Reuss, Pat Lucey, Bob Kastenmeier, Bill Proxmire, and Gaylord Nelson

and so many others.

Gaylord's election for Governor in 1958 was the culmination of that second progressive revival and the LaFollette tradition ran straight through him to the next generation of people who saw Gaylord as an example " people like me, Tom Loftus, Tony Earl, Tammy Baldwin, Russ Feingold, Herb Kohl, and so many others.

I would never have been elected to Congress without his help. He sent Louie Hanson into my district. Louie took one look at "amateur city" and decided that he had better stay around for a while. We know how Gaylord loved to campaign. He came to my district seven weekends in a row. I would not have won without him. The causes he fought for and the way he fought for them made me and all of us gathered here today proud to be in his company.

Now we all have our favorite stories about Gaylord. Mine are those that he told about Clear Lake and Polk County, trying to loosen up his audiences.



Harvey Dueholm was a State Representative and he grew up with Gaylord. He had great courage and an earthy wit and had a face like a basset hound on a bad day. Harvey told the stories about the mischief that Gaylord got into as a child. He told a Congressional Committee once that “We all knew Gaylord would grow up to be in an institution; we just didn’t know it would be the United States Senate.”

My favorite story is one that occurred in this building.

Gaylord was Governor and the Republicans controlled the Legislature. They wanted to solve the deficit by raising the sales tax. The Democrats wanted the income tax to be raised. So Gaylord compromised. He did a little bit of both. He went into the Democratic caucus to explain and when he was done Bill Ward from St. Croix County “Harvey’s roommate” stood up and said, “Gaylord, I love you like a brother but when I go to the Belmont Hotel and I take my clothes off and I put my pajamas on, I climb into bed and put my head on that pillow and put my false teeth in a glass of salt water, my

conscience won't let me vote for a sales tax.â€

Well, Harvey stood up and said, â€œMr. Chairman, I have a suggestion for the gentleman. The next time you go to the Belmont hotel, you take your clothes off, you put your pajamas on, you climb into bed, and you put your head on that pillow, leave your false teeth in your head, put that conscience in that glass of salt water, and everyone would be better off.â€

Gaylord was the funniest speaker I have ever heard, but one night I saw him bested.

One evening in 1959, Adlai Stevenson came to Madison to talk to the Civil War Roundtable. He was about an hour late coming over to the Old Park Hotel to talk to the party faithful. Finally Gaylord came in with Stevenson in tow, swept up to the mike, and said, â€œI'm sorry we're so late so I'll give one of my typically short speeches.â€ Stevenson interrupted and said, â€œI'll give one of my typically long ones.â€ Gaylord said, â€œI'll leave without you.â€ Stevenson said, â€œGo ahead, see who the crowd follows!â€

That was the only time I ever saw Gaylord one upped by

anyone except by Carrie Lee.

Gaylord was incredibly fortunate in his choice of a life's mate. She was strong and dedicated and devoted to him and gave him strength; and the care that she gave him in the last few months of his life was truly wonderful. Gaylord was fiercely proud of her. He said she could smell a phony, even from upwind, faster than anybody he ever knew.

Gaylord's friend Scottie Reston of the New York Times wrote once that "he's not deflated once a week by a loving wife. Members of Congress come to believe that they are what they merely represent."

Gaylord never had to worry about getting a big head as long as Carrie Lee was around. When she was asked once by the press what the secret of their long marriage was, she said, "It's very simple, we're both in love with the same man."

But Gaylord's favorite story about Carrie Lee occurred when Gaylord worked in this building in the State Senate.

He was leaving one night, and as he was walking out of the Capitol he ran into Governor Rennebohm. The Governor said, "Gaylord, would you mind coming over with me to the Madison Club, there are a few things I would like to talk to you about." Gaylord said, "Oh Governor, I would love to, but I haven't been home a single night this week and my wife will kill me if I don't get home." The Governor said, "Let me take care of that, you just dial home."

So Gaylord dialed home and gave the receiver to the Governor.

When Carrie Lee answered the phone, the Governor said, "Mrs. Nelson, this is Governor Rennebohm. I wondered if you would mind if Gaylord stayed downtown for an hour or so,

so I could talk over some business with him.â€

Carrie Lee responded, â€Governor Rennebohm my.....patootie . . .â€ only she didn't say patootie. Then she said, â€Whoever this is, tell that hot shot to get his tail home now.â€

The Governor handed the phone back to Gaylord and said, â€My, you have an interesting wife!â€

He did. And he had an interesting life.

So Carrie Lee, Jeff, Happy, and Tia . . . we all thank you for giving up so much to share him with us. Your sacrifice helped to make Gaylord the greatest post war leader in Wisconsin history and, next to Bob LaFollette himself, the greatest political leader Wisconsin has ever produced.

Gaylord Nelson was the best and the sweetest man in politics that I have ever known. God knows I loved him. We all did. That's why we are here, that's why we'll all miss him so much.

If he could say one thing to all of us today, I think it would simply be, "Carry on! Don't ever; DON'T EVER; give up the fight!"

